

Posted on Tue, Sep. 10, 2002

BART to S.J. gets key jump-start

EXTENSION PLAN WINS FIRST FEDERAL OK

By Gary Richards
Mercury News

Federal officials have completed their first look at plans to extend BART from Fremont to downtown San Jose and have given the \$3.7 billion project an early thumbs up -- a move that could lead to hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from Washington.

The Federal Transit Administration has recommended that local officials proceed with preliminary engineering, setting the stage for more detailed studies that will weigh the merits of the BART extension against dozens of rail projects across the country seeking federal money.

"This is a major first step," FTA spokesman Bruce Frame said Monday from the nation's capital, "because you don't go to the next step without this approval."

The FTA decision came last week after a three-month study and was announced Monday by Congressman Mike Honda and San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales. It comes less than two years after Santa Clara County voters approved a 30-year increase in the local sales tax to build BART, a measure spearheaded by Gonzales and the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group.

"This is really moving fast," said Richard Silver, executive director of the Train Riders Association of California, crediting Gonzales, the manufacturing group and former San Jose Mayor Norm Mineta, now head of the Department of Transportation.

The approval puts the BART project in line to receive \$5 million in federal assistance this year, a small but symbolically vital step. With that money, BART to San Jose jumps into the queue for future funding from the New Starts program for transit.

"We're not only in the queue, we're near the front of the line," Gonzales said. "It's a major milestone and we're now going to get serious consideration for funding."

Local leaders need \$834 million from Washington to complete funding to build the 16 1/2-mile extension from Fremont to San Jose, with tracks ending at the Caltrain depot west of Mineta San Jose International Airport.

While that is a significant chunk of money, Santa Clara County and the state of California are putting up nearly 80 percent of the cost -- a ratio that in most years would make it a lock for federal aid. In the past, Congress has been willing to send aid if a local agency could come up with just 20 percent of building costs.

But the recession, combined with airport security concerns and a possible war with Iraq, have the Department of Transportation squeezing funds.

"There are a lot of distractions right now," Honda said from Washington. "Nothing is set in concrete; nothing is guaranteed."

A decade ago, only 10 agencies across the nation sought federal aid for new commuter trains and light rail lines. But the program has been so popular that nationally 190 projects are forming a long line to get pieces of the \$20 billion in federal aid expected to be available over the next two decades.

Transit officials say construction costs start in four to five years, with trains running by the end of 2012.

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